

FROM THE BOOKSHELF #151
RHODA MAINES AND ROGER LYONS

JULY 27, 1976

KIN-FLICKS BY LISA ALTHER

ANNCR: THE VOICE OF AMERICA BRINGS YOU NOW ANOTHER IN THE WEEKLY SERIES FROM THE BOOKSHELF -- A SERIES IN WHICH WE REPORT ON BOOKS AMERICANS ARE READING. TODAY, A REPORT ON A NEW NOVEL BY LISA ALTHER ENTITLED KIN-FLICKS, PUBLISHED BY KNOFF. HERE NOW IS YOUR BOOK EDITOR. . .

EDITOR: A LONG FIRST NOVEL, KIN-FLICKS GET ITS NAME FROM A PLAY ON WORDS ON THE HOME MOVIES OF FAMILY OCCASIONS, MOSTLY TAKEN BY THE HEROINE'S MOTHER, OF SUCH CRUCIAL EVENTS AS BABY'S FIRST TOOTH, FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL, FIRST DANCE AND SO ON. IT IS ONE OF LISA ALTHER'S CLEVER DEVICES FOR COVERING IN HER BOOK THE TWENTY-SEVEN-YEAR LIFE OF VIRGINIA BABCOCK BLISS, EVEN THOUGH THE ACTUAL STORY COVERS ONLY ONE MONTH. KIN-FLICKS IS REALLY THE STORY OF A BUNCH OF LOSERS, STARTING WITH GINNY HERSELF AND HER FUTILE SEARCH FOR SELFHOOD AND RELEVANCE DURING THE HIPPIE 1960'S AND 1970'S. IN THE PROCESS, SHE EXPERIENCES A WHOLE CATALOGUE OF YOUTHFUL FOLLIES AND HORRORS. LIKE A PILGRIM WITH ALL THE RESOLUTION OF A CORK ON A STORMY OCEAN, SHE HAS INTERLUDES OF LEFT-WING POLITICKING, COMMUNAL FARMING AND KINKY (BIZARRE) SEXUALITY. HER ATTEMPT AT THE CONVENTIONAL APPROACH AS WIFE AND MOTHER IS ALSO A FAILURE. FORTUNATELY, THE BOOK'S HUMOROUS APPROACH LIGHTENS SOME OF THE MORE SORDID EPISODES. GINNY STUMBLES FROM ONE CRACKPOT LIFESTYLE TO THE NEXT, ALWAYS UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF WHOMEVER SHE HAPPENS TO ENCOUNTER AT THE TIME. SHE IS AWARE OF HERSELF AS

EDITOR: "A MUDDLE OF LOYALTIES," A "COOPERATIVE CONVERT" WHO
(CONT) FORTUNATELY PANICS BEFORE TAKING THE FINAL PLUNGE OF
COMMITMENT. "WHEN IN DOUBT, CUT OUT," BECOMES A SORT OF
MOTTO.

GINNY INHERITS FROM HER SMALL TOWN TENNESSEE FAMILY AN
OBSESSION WITH ILLNESS AND DEATH. AS THE NOVEL OPENS, WE
FIND HER FLYING BACK TO HULLSPORT, HER TENNESSEE BIRTHPLACE,
TO VISIT HER DYING MOTHER. GROGGY FROM TWO IN-FLIGHT
MARTINIS, SHE HUDDLES NEAR THE EMERGENCY EXIT,
CHARACTERISTICALLY CONTEMPLATING THE ODDS OF A HI-JACKING,
A BOMB EXPLOSION OR AN AIR CRASH. THE FAMILY PREOCCUPATION
EXPRESSES ITSELF IN MANY WAYS. HER FATHER, ALREADY DEAD OF

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T A HEART ATTACK WHEN THE STORY BEGINS, HAD A HABIT OF
EATING WITH AN ICE PICK BY HIS PLATE, READY TO PERFORM AN
OPERATION IF ANYONE HAPPENED TO CHOKED ON A PIECE OF MEAT.

FAMILY VACATIONS ARE TRIPS TO GRAVESITES OF REMOTE RELATONS.
AND HER MOTHER SPENDS HER SPARE TIME PLANNING HER OWN
FUNERAL AND COMPOSING EPITAPHS.

VOICE: "MRS. BABCOCK CONSIDERED THE EPITAPH BY A GREAT-GREAT-AUNT
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P
T NAMED HATTIE THE PINNACLE OF HER FAMILY'S ACHIEVEMENT:
STOP AND LOOK AS YOU PASS BY./ AS YOU ARE NOW, SO ONCE
WAS I./ AS I AM NOW, SO YOU WILL BE./ PREPARE TO DIE AND
FOLLOW ME./"

EDITOR: BUT DEATH, IT SEEMS, ISN'T MERELY THE END OF LIFE BUT ALSO
THE PREPARATION FOR IT. THE BOOK IS FULL OF INCIDENTS
CONTRASTING LIFE AND DEATH. FOR INSTANCE, GINNY'S FATHER
OWNS A MUNITION'S FACTORY WHICH HIS DAUGHTER PICKETS,

EDITOR: REGISTERING HER PROTEST AGAINST THE VIETNAM WAR.
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THE AGONIZING DEATHBED VISITS TO HER MOTHER, PROVOKE WILD SCENES BETWEEN MOTHER AND DAUGHTER. IN ONE, MRS. BABCOCK ASKS:

VOICE: "WHY ARE YOU STILL ALIVE? YOU SHOULD BE THE ONE IN THIS BED INSTEAD OF ME. YOU'VE DONE NOTHING BUT ASK FOR IT YOUR ENTIRE LIFE -- RACING AROUND ON MOTORCYCLES AND DRINKING MOONSHINE (RAW LIQUOR) AND GOING ON PEACE MARCHES. YOU'VE DONE NOTHING WITH YOUR LIFE BUT PURSUE YOUR SELFISH PERSONAL PLEASURES. ME -- I'VE ALWAYS DONE MY DUTY. I WAITED ON YOU AND YOUR FATHER AND YOUR BROTHERS HAND AND FOOT FOR YEARS. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE, I HAD NO ONE TO ACCOUNT TO BUT MYSELF. I WAS GOING TO TRAVEL, GO BACK TO COLLEGE, TEACH, AND NOW THIS. WHY ME?"

EDITOR: AND THE DAUGHTER'S REPLY:

VOICE: "WHY NOT YOU? GINNY RAGED BACK, SUDDENLY OUT OF CONTROL. AS FOR YOUR WAITING ON US HAND AND FOOT, WE NEVER ASKED YOU TO. YOU DID IT SO THAT YOU'D HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH YOURSELF. IT WAS FOR YOU, MOTHER, NOT FOR US. AND IF ALL I'VE EVER DONE IS CHASE AFTER MY PERSONAL PLEASURES, THEN HOW COME I'M NOT HAVING ANY FUN?"

EDITOR: GINNY, NOW BACK IN HER HOME TOWN, KEEPS ENCOUNTERING THE GIRL SHE WAS WHEN SHE LEFT TEN YEARS AGO. TRYING TO RECAPTURE HER PAST, SHE RECALLS HER FIRST FUMBLING ROMANCE WITH JOE BOB SPARKS WHEN SHE WAS A HIGH SCHOOL BEAUTY QUEEN AND HE WAS THE HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS HERO. ALTHOUGH IT MAY HAVE LOOKED LIKE THE ROMANCE OF THE DECADE, IT WAS ACTUALLY

EDITOR: AN ADOLESCENT AFFAIR CUT SHORT BY JOE BOB'S COACH WHO TOOK
(CONT) A DIFFERENT VIEW OF PERT, FLAG-SWINGING GINNY AND THE WAY SHE WAS
INTERFERING WITH THE COACH'S STRICT TRAINING PROGRAM. JOE
BOB'S CONFIDENCE SUFFERED AND HE COMPLAINED.

VOICE: "COACH SAYS YOU'RE RUININ' ME, GINNY. HE SAYS HE DOESN'T
UNDERSTAND WHAT I SEE IN YOU...HE SAYS YOU'RE OUT TO SAP
MY STRENGTH...WHAT IF HE'S RIGHT?"

EDITOR: DUTY AND CURFEW, HAVING RECLAIMED JOE BOB, GINNY TURNED TO
A NEW BOY FRIEND, CLEM CLOYD, WHO ALSO HAPPENED TO BE THE
TOWN HOODLUM. CLEM INTRODUCED HER TO FLASHY MOTORCYCLES,
HOME BREW, PORNOGRAPHY AND HER FIRST SEXUAL EXPERIENCE. BUT
THE LOVELESS AFFAIR FAILED TO FULFILL EXPECTATIONS ON EITHER
SIDE. NOW, MEETING CLEM TEN YEARS LATER, SHE IS STUNNED BY
THE TRANSFORMATION. HE, TOO, HAS SPENT HIS ADOLESCENCE
PURSUING DEATH, AND HAS ESCAPED IT ONLY BY DIVINE INTERVENTION.
AS A RESULT HE HAS BECOME A COUNTRY PREACHER, RAISED A
FAMILY AND NOW RUNS A LARGE AND SUCCESSFUL FARM. SHE NOTICES
HIS LIMP IS GONE. CLEM EXPLAINS IT AS A MIRACLE, RESULTING
FROM HIS RELIGIOUS CONVERSION. GINNY GOES TO A CHURCH
SERVICE CLEM CONDUCTS AND FINDS HERSELF CAUGHT UP IN THE
FLOOD OF EMOTION SURGING THROUGH THE ROOM. MEMBERS DANCE
IN THE AISLES, AND SPEAK IN TONGUES. SHE WATCHES BREATHLESSLY
WHILE CLEM AND SEVERAL OTHERS PUT THEIR HANDS IN HOT FLAMES
AND PASS POISONOUS COPPERHEAD AND RATTLESNAKES TO EACH OTHER.
SHE FEELS THE EXALTATION, BUT, AS USUAL, SLIPS OUT BEFORE
THE FINAL COMMITMENT.

EDITOR: NO MATTER HOW OUTRAGEOUSLY GINNY ACTS OR HOW FAR SHE GOES TO
(CONT)

TURN SERIOUS BUSINESS INTO COMEDY, EACH INCIDENT IN THE BOOK HAS A PROGRESSIVELY MORE SERIOUS CONSEQUENCE FOR HER. AS THE SCRUBBED, TWEEDY PROTEGE OF A COLLEGE PROFESSOR, SHE MEETS AND DEBATES THE PHILOSOPHERS, DESCARTES, NIETZSCHE, SPINOZA, AND SCHOENBERG. AS THE DOCILE HOUSEWIFE AND DOTTING MOTHER, SHE BECOMES THE QUIET, GENTLE WOMAN FOR IRA BLISS, HER HUSBAND, WHO SELLS SNOWMOBILES.

BUT THE ROLE OF WIFE DOESN'T LAST LONG. A BEARDED VIETNAM WAR RESISTER COMES ALONG AND OFFERS HER TRAINING IN WHAT HE CALLS "TRANSCENDENTAL SEX." FINALLY, HER HUSBAND CATCHES THEM AT THEIR STRANGE PRACTICES AND ORDERS GINNY TO LEAVE THE HOUSE IMMEDIATELY. SHE FLEES TO HER MOTHER'S BEDSIDE ONLY TO WITNESS HER DEATH. CONTEMPLATING HER BLEAK FUTURE, GINNY DECIDES TO COMMIT SUICIDE. BUT EVEN HERE, SHE FAILS. SHE TRIES TO DROWN HERSELF, SHOOT HERSELF, CUT HER WRISTS. NOTHING WORKS AND HER PROPOSED SUICIDE DEGENERATES INTO BURLESQUE.

KIN-FLICKS TELLS A SOMETIMES MOVING STORY ABOUT SOME FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS. BEHIND STAGE, HOWEVER, IS THE SARDONIC, BALEFUL DANCE OF DEATH. NONE OF THE CHARACTERS ARE REALLY LOVABLE; NONE ARE ABLE TO RISE TO LIFE'S CHALLENGES THE READER YEARNS FOR ONE CHARACTER WITH THE STRENGTH TO POINT THE WAY TO POSSIBLE SALVATION. EITHER THIS WAS NOT THE AUTHOR'S INTENTION, OR SHE WASN'T UP TO IT.

ANNCR: YOU HAVE BEEN LISTENING TO A REPORT ON LISA ALTHER'S NOVEL
KIN-FLICKS. AND NOW AN INVITATION TO JOIN US NEXT WEEK
(AT THIS TIME), WHEN THE VOICE OF AMERICA BRINGS YOU ANOTHER
REPORT ON ONE OF THE MANY BOOKS AMERICANS ARE CHOOSING.....
FROM THE BOOKSHELF.

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